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WHAT THE PILGRIM FATHERS ACCOMPLISHED

BY WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS

A President of the United States, in laying the corner-stone of a monument at Provincetown in honor of the *Mayflower* Compact and its makers, talked throughout his speech about the Puritans, scarcely mentioning the Pilgrims, or Separatists. A very high judicial dignitary in England recently declared, in a semi-public utterance, that he had always supposed George Washington to have been a passenger with the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower*! Confusion of ideas, with scanty information as to facts, reigns in British periodicals and in the writings and addresses of men of prominence. These all show the need of clarity, discrimination and correct chronology.

On our side, amid the adulation and even transfiguration of these plain people of 1620, it is well to inquire who they were, and what they really accomplished. Called Separatists at first, they separated as much from the political and bigoted Puritanism of their day as from the Anglican Establishment and such Defenders of the Faith as Elizabeth and James I. In Massachusetts the Plymouth people, who for fifteen years had practiced self-government were, for over a generation, called "Brownists" and looked upon rather as poor relations by the more cultured and wealthy Puritans of the Bay Colony. St. Gaudens' statue of the Puritan deacon at Springfield, Massachusetts, is accepted and labeled "The Pilgrim". Yet it is hard, for the man of research or the critical scholar who loves truth, to recognise much similarity between the two types of men.

Nevertheless there were points of union. In theology and morals, they were spiritual kinsmen. Much the same ideas as to God and man dominated the various breeds of men called Scots, Huguenots, and those Walloons who first, with families, settled our Middle States. These all held to the discipline called "Cal-

vinism"—a creed that did not breed either poverty, ignorance, or frivolity; but was the nurse of heroes and the mother of freedom, public schools, representative government and liberty safeguarded by law.

Neither Luther nor Calvin, however, reached the idea of religion apart from the magistrate, nor of self-governed, independent churches, each, like the primitive Christian congregations, a republic in itself.

We may hint at some of the Pilgrim achievements and contributions to civilization and human progress.

(1) They gave a model for true historiography. All the literature of the Pilgrims themselves, the records in the archives and the books of their era, as well as the writings and charges of their enemies—and which we of today are so proud that they made—tell a consistent story.

Barrows, Greenwood and Penry (the first Pilgrim Father, martyr of 1593) and the men of Scrooby, Leyden and Plymouth helped mightily to recover both fact and truth. In a large sense, they founded the modern school of history, which is based on critical research and the original documents. Their aim, as to method and spirit, was ever to inquire of the Founder of Christianity and of those who organized the first Christian churches. Their appeal was invariably to the authentic writings of the first and second centuries. For the mass of mediæval legend, the edicts of kings, or feudal lords, hierarchs, or the salaried parasites upon a system that grew up out of the original Roman autocracy derivative, the Holy Roman Empire, they cared not a jot. Both John Robinson and his pupil William Bradford set a new mark in the writings of church history.

(2) These Separatists broke the yoke of Norman feudalism. When the foreign conqueror laid his heavy hand on the Anglo-Saxon land, he compelled every bishop, and church officer to be his liege man and vassal. To him all church officers, being feudatories, must be personally loyal. So tremendously centralised has English government, for over a thousand years, been, in both church and state, that it is next to impossible for the average Englishman to understand the inner workings of fed-

eral government; which is so clear to the Dutch and Swiss, and vastly easier for the more democratic Scottish and Welsh, to comprehend.

In England, Wyckliffe, with his doctrine of "dominion founded on grace", had attacked certain forms of this intense centralization and for his activities we all know his fate. Yet even the Bible in the vernacular, which his "poor preachers" and the Lollards used, was but a translation of a translation, and this from the Latin, which had so long misrepresented the Hellenic mind and Hebrew record. On the contrary, the Pilgrims used the Geneva version, which was based on the original Greek. They went further than Wyckliffe and put into form and life the model given in the New Testament. At a time when tithe—barns, castles, episcopal palaces, monasteries and nunneries, studded English soil, when a semi-political church inspector, called a bishop, could imprison or hang you, and when printing was a royal monopoly, like coinage, and both the Tudor and the Stuart dynasties were tending to absolutism, these Separatists virtually created a new state, while renewing an ancient form of spiritual government. They set the model for what we all enjoy today—a free church in a free state, which should be without interference from political rulers.

(3) They applied democracy to religion, or rather, they restored the form of Christianity as recorded in the primitive documents, when a "church" was in a house and consisted of a company of believers who chose their own officers. It borders on the ridiculous for writers, like Arber, to say that as a form of church order, that of the Pilgrims was "nowhere". Not only did the Scrooby and Leyden people live in peace and prosperity, but in 1921, the six thousand Congregational churches in the United States and as many more in the various English-speaking nations and in other countries, and in the mission centres throughout the world hold to the same fundamental law. Can any other body of religious people show a nobler record in education, literature, philanthropy, statesmanship, moral progress, or the production of men and women eminent in reform and leadership? Theirs, in Leyden and Plymouth, was government for the people, of the people and by the people, and the secret of three centuries of

success lies in their intense vital trust in God which gave them so fruitful a faith in man.

(4) The Pilgrims showed how, under the bond and sanction of great ideas, a company of men of various nationalities, differing minds, social grades, and hereditary tastes and temperaments could hold and work together for the common good—"one for all and all for one". The real, initial, and efficient body of the colony was not on the *Mayflower*, with its very mixed company, bad characters and people of Anti-Separatist opinions, but in the organization at Leyden, on the *Speedwell*, and in the four later Pilgrim ships. Here were people of eight nationalities. Predominantly English, there were those also of Scotch, Irish, Welsh, Dutch, Walloon, French, German and Danish birth or stock. For twelve years, they lived in unity, peace and brotherhood, as Bradford and his fellow writers and the magistrates of Leyden gladly acknowledged. Deemed a Utopia—even as the American commonwealth was later so judged to be—they made ideals a reality. The occasion of the immortal compact, made and signed in the cabin of the *Mayflower*, November 11, 1620 was, in the main, for protection against the "mutterings" of some in the motley company "shuffled in" on them from London, as Bradford records, by the financial backers of the colonization scheme. From their debts and servitude to this London financing corporation, and the persistent machinations of these non-sympathizers, the Pilgrims were not, for seven years, able to shake themselves free. In miniature, this union of heart and mind in Leyden was a prototype of the American commonwealth.

(5) In the face of great odds, the Pilgrims won success as heroes. The loss to them of the *Speedwell*, their expenditure, at Southampton, Dartmouth and Plymouth, before they sailed, of over \$5000, through the delays and subterfuges of her half-hearted and perhaps scoundrelly captain, left the colonists marooned on a barren shore, where they had never expected to be. A score of previous attempts at colonization had failed, yet with faith, pluck and perseverance, the Separatists demonstrated that white men could live and prosper, even in so cold a climate and in so savage a wilderness. It is true that they were mightily helped and that their first notable economic advance was made

by the Walloons and Dutch of Manhattan. These revealed to the Pilgrims the existence of shell money, or wampum, invented by the Iroquois, and hitherto unknown to the Algonquins. "Trucking", or trade, was thus powerfully stimulated. The Pilgrims made experiment of the communal system and abandoned it for individual ownership of land. At the end of seven years, they had paid their debts and were financially independent and prosperous.

It was this economic success that impressed Europe and set in motion the great Puritan emigration, which, in twenty years brought over as many thousand British folk, English and Welsh. Then the Old Colony was swallowed up in the mass of New Englanders and its story was virtually lost for a century and a half. It is mainly within living men's memories that the truth concerning the Pilgrims has swum into their ken.

(6) The demonstration of the possibility of a free church in a free State was so manifest, that the Puritans of New England wholly, and in England largely, became Separatists, or Free Churchmen. Their descendants have today, six thousand congregations, forty colleges, and vast wealth and prosperity, in the United States alone; while in England they are only second in church accommodation, character and resources, to those in the Establishment. The fish, furs, timber, drugs and grain, from beyond the Atlantic, when seen in England changed the minds of men in the British Isles. Even more convincing and persuading to the thoughtful was the picture of a self-governed church and State, without bishops and without kings—but with tolerance, even as had been seen in the Dutch republic, where "religion was free for all men". A new world of opinion and practice had dawned. It was but a few months after the Puritans had reached these shores, that, impressed by the object lesson before their eyes, they followed the Pilgrims, in changing their church government to the Congregational form. The frontier theory of history was thus illustrated.

(7) The Pilgrims achieved their goal without any real "break with the past", even though prelatical writers charge this against them and their followers in America, saying that our American culture is wholly unmixed and exclusively of English origin.

In reality, ours is not an English nation, but rather a new Europe. The Separatists did break away from the insular notions, cruel customs, regal autocracy, ecclesiastical despotism, mediæval custom, ritual that had overlaid the primitive faith, and interpretations of Scripture, excess of symbols, the bigotry of men of their own name, and from the Anglicisms in the English Bible, that mar any true translation of the Hebrew and Greek inspired texts and which the islanders habitually imagined were of divine origin. Yet above all things, the eager and steadfast purpose of the Pilgrim thinkers, writers and men of affairs was not to break with the past, but rather to return to it, even to primitive truth and simplicity. They acted ever in obedience to the Divine word and in unswerving loyalty to their great Exemplar.

The spirit of tolerance which the Pilgrims exhibited throughout their history, nursed and stimulated to greater breadth in the Dutch republic, is one of the wonders of history. Not only did they pass the point, which Luther and Calvin had reached and at which these Reformers stopped, but they pressed on. Robinson, their leader, the teaching member of their church, who grieved at the reactionary attitude of these leaders, urged his own people to look for more light to break out from the Divine Word. Ultra-conservatives of the Pilgrim tradition have in vain attempted to restrict the scope and application of Robinson's words to the one item of church polity or government. As a matter of fact, the Plymouth men developed, rather than limited, their pastor's urgent appeal. In Leyden, they had welcomed one and all adherents to, or members of any Reformed churches to their communion. In Plymouth, they were able to hold in their company Miles Standish, who was not a member of the church, and whose adhesion to the Roman Catholic tradition and discipline has never been disproved, and John Alden, who was, most probably, an Irishman. The Roger Williams whom the Pilgrims held in brotherhood, but whom the Puritans penalized and exiled, was not the old and wise Governor of later years, but a young Welshman of many notions, most of them not conforming to true Pilgrim ideal. There were no witchcraft persecutions in Plymouth. This was not because there were few possible victims of this cruel delusion in Plymouth, but mainly because in Holland, where the

Pilgrims were trained, there had already been published and widely read the first scientific attacks against this superstition, so that the Plymouth people were free from its grip and bond. Moreover, tolerance had taught them charity, patience and justice.

It would be absurd to claim for the Pilgrims the same ideas of religious liberty, or even of broad tolerance that have ripened in the world during three centuries or more, since William of Orange in 1574 uttered the first clear voice of a modern ruler and said to his subordinate magistrates: "You have no right to interfere with the conscience of anyone, so long as he does not work a public scandal or an injury to his neighbor". Yet these Separatist Pilgrim Fathers were far superior in tolerance to the Puritans of the Bay Colony in Massachusetts—much as some of their descendants or admirers may vehemently deny this and represent to the contrary.

There was a subtle union of their ideas, fostered by close study of the first Christian documents with the example of the Founder, who said "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold". They knew also the original Greek of the record which says not, that there may be not one "fold", but that there may be "one flock, one shepherd".

It may be truly said that the people of the United States of America, dropping much of the Puritan and Puritanical dogmas and practices, have entered more fully into the ideals and ways of the Pilgrims. In making an image in their minds, the well-informed do not confuse St. Gaudens' Puritan deacon of Springfield with such men as Bradford or Brewster. A truer conception and artistic triumph in sculpture, by John Quincy Adams Ward, is seen in Central Park, which belongs to that wonderful agglomeration of nationalities called New York City. Here stands in imperishable bronze the figure of a young, stalwart man, as if in the fulness of life, with snaphance and bandoliers, clothes of the period, alert, patient, and in the affluence and balanced energies of complete manhood.

Why do people of all creeds, cultures and nationalities in America now admire and claim inheritances from these Separatists, the Pilgrim Fathers? Is it not because they see in their story the

successful attempt to realize the hopes of ages, which have found fruition in the American federal system of states, so grandly united under the Constitution? The Pilgrim spirit has animated a nation and its example leavened all our national history.

In Europe, in 1920, six Episcopal bishops were in the American delegation celebrating the Pilgrim Tercentenary exercises—which were inaugurated by Queen Wilhelmina, beloved ruler of the land that never denied asylum to refugees for reasons of conscience or political opinions; and this in her own palace. In England, bishops, curates, and high officers of the realm sat at the banquets, offered prayer, or tendered congratulations.

In a word, the Pilgrims after three centuries have come to transfiguration, for they

wrought with a sad sincerity

and “builded better than they knew”.

WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS.